

Two Parisian bookstores, side by side, are waging a culture war

James McAuley / *The Washington Post* / 16 juin 2019

PARIS — The Latin Quarter is a bookish neighborhood, synonymous with French intellectual prestige. And so it's hardly remarkable that two bookstores would open on the same block. But the neighboring bookstores on the Rue de Medicis present a striking juxtaposition. Side by side, they are battling for the future of Western civilization.

At No. 11 Rue de Medicis is La Nouvelle Librairie, which proudly displays the works of proto-fascist thinkers (Joseph de Maistre) and convicted Holocaust deniers (Jean-Marie Le Pen).

"This is a space of liberty and resistance," said François Bousquet, the shop's director and the editor of *Éléments*, a right-wing journal. When asked what was being resisted, he responded: "How to say it? To dominant leftist thought."

Next door — at No. 9 Rue de Medicis — is the Red Wheelbarrow, an Anglophone bookshop named after a poem by William Carlos Williams.

On its Facebook page this past week, the Red Wheelbarrow was promoting a Holocaust Memorial book fair and a story time with the author of "Marielle in Paris," about a mouse dressmaker who lives in an upside-down flowerpot. That's hardly a political text. But the bookstore's windows have featured titles such as "Dream Big Little Leader," "Malala" and "Drawing Europe Together."

Proprietor Penelope Fletcher, a Canadian who moved to France in 1990, doesn't buy the victim narrative her neighbors have started selling with their books.

"This is what they do," she said. "People used to hide the fact that they supported the [right-wing party Rassemblement National], and now they don't. This bookstore takes it one step further, in presenting themselves as respectable 'intellectuals.' They're smart. They know what they're doing — and that's scary."

Bousquet said his bookstore, indeed, has "certain objectives."

"The first is to become visible, for these ideas to impose themselves in the street," he said. "The second is to address students. This area has the largest concentration of schools in Paris, and we tell them they are not alone in universities dominated by cultural leftism since 1968."

It's not clear that most passersby even notice the war La Nouvelle Librairie is attempting to wage. From the street, it looks like any number of other nearby antiquarian shops. With its dark wood paneling and delicate glass vitrines, it could just as easily be selling slightly chipped pieces of grand-mère's Limoges.

But Fletcher is disturbed by what's happening next door, at the shop that opened last fall just a few months after hers did. And she has formed something of a one-woman protest.

In her window this past week, she made a point to display a picture book about Ruby Bridges, the first black child to desegregate a New Orleans public school.

She also refuses to collect her neighbor's packages if deliveries arrive when they are closed, as she would do for others. "Which," she said, "is very rude of us."

One evening, she said, an elderly gentlemen approached her to ask for a volume by African American writer Chester Himes. Before the man left, Fletcher gifted him a Red Wheelbarrow bookmark. But then she saw him clapping at an event next door honoring white nationalist historian Dominique Venner. (Venner committed suicide in Notre Dame Cathedral in 2013 after publishing a manifesto decrying same-sex marriage, as well as the "total replacement of the population of France, and of Europe" by African and Muslim immigrants.) Fletcher walked over and demanded the bookmark back.

"Our lives are political, and we can't sit back and be phlegmatic," she said. "The normalization of the far right is taking place. Why is nobody else up in arms about this?"

Jean-Pierre Le Cocq, a member of France's center-right Les Républicains party and the mayor of Paris's sixth arrondissement, where the Rue de Medicis is located, said he was unconcerned by the presence of La Nouvelle Librairie. To be worried would be to oppose freedom of expression, he said.

"No one has the right to restrict things except if they incite racial hatred," Le Cocq said, noting that during the later years of the Cold War, there was a well-known communist bookstore on the nearby Rue de Buci. "To fight evil ideas with ideas is the force of a democratic state. If you banish them, you strengthen convictions of those who hold them. I'm against that."

Last year, the French government formally withdrew an edition of commemorative books that included Charles Maurras, an anti-Semitic writer who was twice convicted of inciting violence against Jewish politicians. France's first Jewish prime minister, Léon Blum, nearly died of injuries he suffered in a brutal attack by Maurras's allies. On Friday, La Nouvelle Librairie hosted an homage to Maurras. Bousquet insists that only when signing the three-year lease did he discover that Maurras's nationalist organization, Action Française, operated a bookstore in the same spot during the interwar years. The name of that earlier bookstore: "La Nouvelle Librairie nationale."

James McAuley